

The Architects and the Ideas Behind the Chicago School

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"Good Buildings...Cheap." That was the motto of William Holabird, a Chicago School architect.

There are many aspects to the Chicago school. The Chicago school was a style that developed as a result of the Great Fire of Chicago in 1871. Before the fire, buildings were built of huge amounts of stone, and could not be very high. With the growing use of the elevator, and the steel skeleton, the buildings grew taller and taller. The steel structure also allowed windows to be made bigger. The Chicago certainly contributed much to Illinois architecture, but hardly anyone knows about the great ideas and strong personalities of Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan, Daniel Burnham and John Root, William Holabird and Martin Roche, and William Le Baron Jenney.

Sullivan and Adler are names that appear often in architectural history. Sullivan thought that architecture should never be studied as a series of styles, because styles did not deal with buildings' main design and construction. Louis Sullivan was born in 1856. Through his career he searched for the rule that would have no exceptions, after a teacher, Clopet, said, "I suggest you place the textbook in the wastebasket; we shall have no use of it here; for here our demonstrations shall be so broad as to admit NO EXCEPTION." Dankmar Adler was born in 1844. Although he had some education, he stopped school to study with E. Smith. Sullivan and Adler became partners after Adler quit the army in 1880 and built the Transportation Building, the Prudential Building, and the Condict Building among others. Sullivan was primarily engrossed with the planning and architectural design problems, whereas Adler worked with business and engineering matters, having served as an engineer in the army. Unfortunately, Adler stopped the partnership to become a consulting architect. Though Adler later wanted to

restore the partnership, Sullivan refused. Sullivan turned to drinking, and died in 1924. Adler died in 1900.

Burnham and Root are better known architects in the Chicago School. However, they got off to a bad start. In the beginning, Louis Sullivan told them that they were not well suited for the job. Daniel Burnham was born on September 4, 1846 in Henderson, New York. As W. A. Starrett wrote, "He had a forceful, if austere, personality, and his vision was practical, as it was far-reaching." "Make no little plans," he once said. John Root was born on January 10, 1850. He first decided what materials would be used, then began the actual drawing.

Burnham and Root formed a partnership in 1873, with Burnham supplying the customers and Root doing the work. Together they looked at Henry Richardson's work and created some wonderful buildings. The Women's Temple, the Masonic Temple, the Montauk Building, and the Reliance Building were designed by the pair, but the Reliance Building was completed five years after Root's death, on January 15, 1891. Burnham died afterwards in June 1912. Without Burnham and Root the world might never have seen the "Chicago Windows," and the steel skeleton framework.

Another remarkable team was Holabird and Roche. They too had difficulties in the beginning. William Holabird was born in 1854. He was a smart man, and only needed to look once to make architectural decisions. His father was in the army; hence, Holabird went to West Point Academy, where he was expelled for going to the saloon town of Garrison. His father helped reinstate him, only to have Holabird resign to marry Molly Augur in 1875. They moved to Chicago where Holabird studied under William Le Baron Jenney, a famous architect. Roche, on the other hand, was almost the opposite of Holabird. Born in 1855, he unfortunately had a curvature of the spine, making him stooped and probably contributing to his shy, retiring

personality. He remained a lifelong bachelor. When looking at something, he would have to study it very carefully. He kept diaries, but made very short entries. It seems so very unlikely that the two would join up, but they did and the partnership worked beautifully. Holabird managed the business, and Roche drew all of the sketches. Together they built the Tacoma Building, the Pontiac building, and the Marquette building, to name a few. Holabird died in 1923, and Roche died in 1927.

Many people consider Jenney to be the father of the Chicago School. However, one can not be sure if he truly was because he was a very private person. William Le Baron Jenney was born in 1832. Second of seven children, he was raised as the eldest since his older brother died in infancy. Jenney chose a French education, and so went to The Ecole Centrale des Arts et Manufactures. He then married Hannah Cobb in 1867 and moved to Chicago where they had two sons, Max and Francis. As Francis puts it, "he was absent-minded and did many amusing things: such as wearing his day shirt over his nightshirt on one occasion, and not discovering it until he retired that night. His comment was, 'I thought, I felt stuffy all day.'" His main purpose in architecture was the development of more efficient structural features. He built The Home Insurance building, the Fair Store (built with William B. Mundie), and the First Leiter and the Leiter Store. Jenney died in Los Angeles in 1907.

The bold architecture of the Chicago School gave Chicago its characteristic urban style and made it the nation's "Second City." To go to Chicago and look at all the distinctive buildings the group created is simply wondrous. The mere fact that these different men from diverse backgrounds and distinct personalities could all come together and make up the famous architectural style known as the Chicago school is astounding. [From Robert Breugmann, *The Architects and the City*; Wichit Charernbhak, *Chicago School Architects and Their Critics*;

“Chicago Landmarks,” City of Chicago Department of Planning and Development, Landmarks Division, www.ei.chi.il.us/landmarks/styleguide/chicagoschool.html (Oct. 8, 2003); Carl W. Condit, *The Chicago School of Architecture*; Masami Takayama, “Interview with John A. Holabird by Masami Takayama,” *Process*; Theodore Rurak, *William Le Baron Jenney*.]